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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 003059

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PTER PREL KIRF CH

SUBJECT: PRC: FAITHFUL FLOCK TO OFFICIAL CHRISTIAN CHURCHES
IN HEBEI AND URUMQI

Classified By: Political Section Chief Aubrey Carlson. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Regular worshippers at two official Protestant churches in Hebei Province and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region regularly exceed 3,000. Growth in attendance poses new challenges for the official church, particularly in the areas of clergy training and social services. In response, Hebei's Bethel Church opened a new lay training center October 17, and Urumqi's Mingde Street Church is expanding social services. One scholar claimed that in light of unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang in recent years, PRC officials increasingly view Christian groups as relatively benign. End Summary.

Hebei: Thousands Attend Bethel Church Service

¶2. (C) PolOff traveled October 17-18 to Baoding, Hebei province, approximately 120 miles southwest of Beijing. Bethel Church, the largest official Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) Protestant church in northern China and the second largest in the country, hosted U.S. evangelical preacher Rev. Franklin Graham, a delegation from the Billy Graham Evangelical Association (BGEA) and its affiliated NGO Samaritan's Purse, for an October 17 service to dedicate a new Layperson Training Center at Bethel Church and to preach at a Sunday service October 18.

¶3. (C) With seating for 3,000, Bethel Church is Hebei's largest Christian house of worship. However, church leaders said that training of clergy had not been able to keep pace with the growth in the congregations of local official TSPM churches. The newly constructed training center, located on the grounds of Bethel Church, aimed to fill this gap. Approximately half of the funds for the new six-story training center came from the national TSPM organization and the China Christian Council. The remainder of the construction costs came from individual donations, loans to Bethel Church and a \$50,000 contribution from BGEA. The training center included classrooms, a dormitory and a cafeteria. According to Bethel church volunteers, at capacity, it would be able to train fifty lay clergy at a time, mostly from Hebei province.

¶4. (C) On October 17, Rev. Graham participated in a well-attended dedication ceremony for the new training center. Rev. Yunpeng Jin, president of the Hebei provincial TSPM office, Bethel Church Pastor Baoshan Cheng, Hebei Christian Council officials, and United Front Work Department representatives also gave remarks at the opening, focusing on the positive role that the training center would play in the community. On October 18, Rev. Graham was welcomed to Bethel Church by a marching band and a large crowd of congregants. Unofficial estimates of the crowd following the service were between 4,000 and 4,500; Bethel Church officials later claimed the number to be 10,000.

Urumqi: Attendance Grows; Social Services Expanding

¶15. (C) During a visit to the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), PolOffs met October 20 with Rev. Fan Chenguang, Vice Chair of the Urumqi Christian Council and Pastor of the Mingde Street Church, located in downtown Urumqi. According to Rev. Fan, the 2,500-seat, 4,000-member, Mingde Street Church is the largest TSPM Protestant church in Urumqi, as well as the largest in the XUAR. To accommodate its large congregation, the church holds two Sunday services, each attended by approximately 2,000 people, seated on three different floors, with the service broadcast to each floor through closed-circuit television.

¶16. (C) The majority of her parishioners were Han, Fan said, with very few Uighurs or foreigners attending services. In recent years, the number of worshippers at churches in Urumqi, including her own, had increased steadily, Fan stated. While able to build a new church in the late 1990s, Fan said, she lamented the fact that the Mingde Street Church still lacked adequate training facilities to meet the demand for more clergy. Fan had heard about the opening of the Baoding Bethel Church Lay Training Center and hoped that her church could build a similar facility.

¶17. (C) The growth in the number of her parishioners had been met with an accompanying expansion of church services, Rev. Fan said. Fan described a range of social support services, small group activities, and classes. The church supported more than 80 seniors and provided medical care to those in

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need. In addition to nightly prayer meetings, the church hosted a Saturday evening youth group. The basement of the six-story church building had been converted recently into smaller rooms for use by these small groups and included a computer classroom.

¶18. (C) Rev. Fan reported that, in Urumqi, the relationship between house churches and the official church differed from the situation in other parts of China. There were many house churches in Urumqi, Rev. Fan noted. Worshippers often attended smaller-scale prayer meetings at house churches during the week and attended weekend services at the official church.

Christian Faithful Less Threatening than Other Religions?

¶19. (C) The numbers of congregants attending Hebei's Baoding Bethel Church and Urumqi's Mingde Street Church are illustrative of the growth in Protestant congregations in China. In an October 21 meeting with PolOff in the Xinjiang city of Shihezi, Peking University Professor He Weifang, "on detail" to Shihezi University, echoed Fan's comments that the number of Christians in Xinjiang was increasing. International media reports on October 21 quoted Rev. Gao Feng, president of the China Christian Council, as saying that one of the biggest challenges facing the official church was training enough pastors to keep up with the growth in the Christian community. For example, Rev. Feng noted that in his home province of Shandong, one congregation of 40,000 had just one trained pastor.

¶10. (C) During an October 24 meeting with PolOff, Liu Peng, a scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences American Studies Institute, claimed that following the Lhasa riots in March 2008 and the Urumqi riots in July 2009, the general attitude of the Chinese government toward Christians had changed. Christians were now perceived as "less of a threat to social stability than Muslims." Liu said that the Chinese government viewed Christians as "only seeking to pray on Sunday mornings," in contrast to a perception that Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists were responsible for the

violent unrest in Tibet and the XUAR.
HUNTSMAN